

BOOK REVIEWS

GUIDELINES FOR TESTING PSYCHIC CLAIMANTS by Richard Wiseman and Robert L. Morris. Hatfield, Great Britain: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1995. Pp. 72. £7 (paperback). ISBN 0-0900458-58-5.

The authors want to encourage more investigations of psychic claimants. They contrast this focus with the experimental investigation of psi which uses relatively unselected and large numbers of subjects. The latter type of investigation, popularized by J. B. Rhine, seeks evidence for psi in relatively small departures from a chance baseline. The effects are typically small and require sophisticated statistical inference for their detection. Tests of psychic claimants, on the other hand, focus on the claims of a single individual, and the phenomena being investigated, when they occur, are dramatic, obvious to the observer, and require no statistical inference to document their presence.

Wiseman and Morris offer their manual to provide "pragmatic and flexible guidelines for those who want to test psychic claimants." The guidelines cover such things as negotiating a mutually acceptable procedure, ethical issues, developing a testable claim, conducting pilot and formal studies, avoiding misunderstandings, how to report the results, and the role of proof-oriented versus process-oriented research. Much of the advice deals with the problem of anticipating and coping with fraud. Indeed, the authors provide advice on just about every concern that might arise in testing a psychic claimant. Of those concerns not covered, the authors state their intention of including them in future versions of their manual.

Not counting the references and appendices, all this material is covered in less than 50 pages of text. This brevity of coverage brings up one of my reservations about the value of these guidelines. Doing successful research requires skills, knowledge, and procedures that are complicated and sophisticated. Textbooks and manuals for doing research in specific areas are much more detailed and much longer than this brief guide for testing psychic claimants. Moreover, the typical methodological textbook is not meant to stand on its own, but is written for courses in which students will gain supervised experience in laboratories.

So the first reservation is that these guidelines lack the detail necessary for a novice researcher to successfully implement the suggestions. The second reservation is that doing successful research is not

something that can be learned from just reading a manual—no matter how detailed the instructions. Research in any area of inquiry requires apprenticeship—tutelage from experts and direct hands-on experience under careful supervision.

My third reservation is that testing psychic claimants differs from ordinary scientific investigation in critical ways. By default, the authors seem to imply that investigating psychic claimants can be just as scientific as parapsychological experiments on unselected subjects are. This strikes me as patently wrong. One characteristic of scientific inquiry is the use of standardized procedures, debugged apparatus, and highly formalized methods of data analysis. When subjects participate in scientific experiments, they have to accommodate their behavior to fit the previously standardized experimental protocol.

The situation with psychic claimants typically precludes this type of standardization and formalization. Each claimant comes to the investigator with a unique set of claims and requirements. The experimental design and protocol have to be negotiated anew with each claimant. Much of the procedure, equipment, and analysis is *ad hoc*. More often than not, it is the experimenter and the test procedure that have to accommodate to the claimant rather than the claimant accommodating him- or herself to a previously established and debugged procedure. In my opinion, it is this feature that makes the scientific contribution from tests of psychic claimants problematical. Indeed, I believe Rhine's motivation for making parapsychology a laboratory science was just this realization that testing psychic claimants and investigating spontaneous phenomena could never produce data that would merit scientific status.

I understand the motivation for wanting to test psychic claimants. Wiseman and Morris echo the sentiments of some key figures in parapsychology who have become disenchanted with the erratic and weak effects that emerge from the laboratory experiments on unselected subjects. The alleged phenomena that occurred in the presence of Home, Palladino, and other "psychic" superstars, if real, do not require powerful statistical analyses and the rejection of a null hypothesis to demonstrate their existence. Compared with the puny effect sizes that can be detected only as puny discrepancies from a chance baseline, the levitations of Home, the table movements of Palladino, and the spoon-bending of Geller are striking and dramatic. If the investigator can show that such dramatic phenomena occur under conditions that preclude fraud and other mundane alternatives, the case for the paranormal would indeed appear more compelling.

Psychical research, however, began with the investigation of spontaneous phenomena and those generated by psychic claimants. It was the inability to make a convincing scientific argument based on such

phenomena that produced the current emphasis upon statistical effects collected from relatively unselected subjects in standardized experimental designs. Wiseman and Morris provide no arguments for believing that the return to the testing of psychic claimants will provide a scientific case for psi.

Several questions occur to me regarding this guidebook. Who is the intended audience? The authors imply that they are writing their manual for novice investigators. They say, at one point, that they want to encourage more investigation of psychic claimants. In my opinion this is the wrong audience. Indeed, I would urge the authors, in their future revisions, to warn novice investigators to avoid testing psychic claimants. Such testing is a risky undertaking even for highly sophisticated investigators such as Wiseman and Morris. Even if they follow the advice to read books on conjuring, novice investigators are no match for a skilled trickster.

On the other hand, I believe that experienced and skilled investigators *can* be helped by these guidelines. Although, as I have said, the suggestions are too succinct to instruct an investigator in the specifics of procedures, the total set of guidelines serves as a very useful checklist or reminder of the many considerations that need to be addressed if the test is to have a chance to succeed.

Another question is why the authors fail to give even one example of a successful test of a "true" psychic. Wiseman and Morris clearly imply that some claimants are genuine and that others are fraudulent. They devote much of their advice to ways of detecting or preventing fraud. They also provide a few examples of investigations that detected fraud. Surprisingly, they do not point to a single test of a psychic claimant that resulted in the conclusion that the claims were, in fact, genuine. Is there asymmetry here? When a test turns up fraud, we have a clear conclusion to draw. When a test fails to detect fraud, is this sufficient to claim that the observed phenomena were paranormal?

In their last chapter, the authors warn their readers that "in this type of research it is especially true that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing" (p. 55). I hope this warning is put up front and expanded and repeated in future editions. They go on to say: "Genuine claimants present parapsychologists with a valuable opportunity to learn about psychic functioning. Dishonest claimants provide an excellent chance to investigate the psychology of deception" (pp. 55-56). These goals justify encouraging parapsychologists to test psychic claimants only if there exist general and reliable procedures to distinguish potentially genuine from fake claimants. So far as I can tell, no parapsychologist has shown that such procedures exist. Even if we assume that the authors' guidelines are based on reliable methods, the brevity of their presentation

makes it impossible for a novice to execute these methods properly. In several places, however, Wiseman and Morris admit that the investigator has to rely on luck and that there are no foolproof techniques to guarantee success in this precarious form of investigation.

RAY HYMAN

*Department of Psychology
1227 University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon 97403-1227*

ERNESTO BOZZANO E LA RICERCA PSICHICA: VITA E OPERE DI UN PIONIERI DELLA PARAPSICOLOGIA [*Ernesto Bozzano and Psychical Research: The Life and Work of a Pioneer of Parapsychology*] by Silvio Ravaldini. Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1994. Pp. 245. 25.000 lira. ISBN 88-272-0272-2.

Throughout the history of psychical research, several researchers have interpreted psi phenomena as evidence of the existence of a non-physical aspect of human existence. Among these were Frederic W. H. Myers, Camille Flammarion, J. B. Rhine, and Emilio Servadio. Another such person was the Italian researcher Ernesto Bozzano (1862-1943). Bozzano, generally forgotten by contemporary parapsychologists, was well known in his time for his defense of the existence of the soul separate from the body, for the interpretation of some forms of psychic phenomena in terms of discarnate agency, and for his numerous articles and books on a variety of topics and phenomena of parapsychology. Bozzano's publications were characterized by systematic classifications of types and gradations of psychic phenomena, and he compiled many cases from the international spiritualistic and psychical research literatures. In his time he was also well known for his polemics and his debates on theoretical issues concerning the interpretation of psychic phenomena with figures such as William Mackenzie, Enrico Morselli, Charles Richet, and René Sudre, among others.

Until recently our knowledge of the life and work of Bozzano has been fragmentary because of a lack of detailed biographical studies going beyond review articles. The first major exception was a monograph published by Giovanni Iannuzzo (1983), which I reviewed in detail (Alvarado, 1987). In my review I praised the monograph, especially its discussion of the methodology used by Bozzano in his analysis of cases of psychic phenomena. This work was and remains a basic source for understanding Bozzano, but there is still room for further studies revealing more about his personal life and his work on specific